

SUPERIOR UNION HALL
State Highway 371, Block 2.
Part of Lots 9 and 10
Superior
Sweetwater County
Wyoming

HABS NO. WY-110

HABS
WYO
19-SUPR,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
SUPERIOR UNION HALL

HABS
WYO
19-SUPR,
1-

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: Town of Superior
NE1/4 NE1/4 SW1/4 NE1/4 SW1/4 Section 28,
T21N, R102W

USGS Quad: South Superior 7.5' Provisional

UTM: 12/668940E/4825340N

Date of Construction: 1922

Present Owner: Sweetwater County, Green River Court House, 50
Flaming Gorge Way

Significance: In the early twentieth century the United Mine
Workers of America, Superior Local constructed the
Superior Union Hall. It was originally built to
serve both the Union and the community. The
building contained both a stage and a dance floor
on the second floor. This served the people in
the coal mining town of Superior as a place to
assemble for cultural, political, and social
events. It was one of the largest assembly halls
in the town and became a community center. Unlike
other assembly halls at Superior, this building
was not owned by the coal company. It served as a
focal point for both the Superior and South
Superior communities.

Historian: A. Dudley Gardner, Historian
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II. HISTORY

The town of South Superior came into existence as a result of coal mining development along Horse Thief Canyon. The community experienced the normal ups and downs associated with an economy based on coal mining. The town's entire economy revolved around mining. When the mines closed in the 1950s and early 1960s the fact the area's economy was based on a single resource became all too apparent. From an all time high of 900 people the population of South Superior plummeted to 197 persons in 1970. The nearby community of Superior had 1676 residents in 1925 and no one lived there in 1970.

When construction of housing and support facilities at Superior began is not precisely known. Probably as early as 1903, when the first coal prospect was made at C Mine, structures began to appear at the future community of Superior. By 1907 the townsite of Superior began to emerge. Early construction activity apparently centered around C Hill. By 1909, C Hill had a number of residential structures. Growth continued and in 1915 there were 1382 individuals living at Superior.¹ By 1925 that number had increased to 1676.² These census figures include all three localities at Superior: C Hill, B Hill, and D Hill.

The historic town of Superior is located in upper Horse Thief Canyon. A company town, it was initially built by Superior Coal. Later, Union Pacific Coal Company took control of the mine operations and coal camp. Superior Coal had always been a subsidiary of Union Pacific. These mining interests also operated mining camps at A Mine (commonly called Jap Town at one time) and D Mine (D Camp). Other company-owned mining camps were also located in the area. Two independent coal companies opened camps for their employees at Premier and Copenhagen. While the mining camps were being built, two privately owned communities were established. The first was called Dog Town, which was located adjacent to B Mine. Just east of Dog Town was South Superior. Initially called White City, South Superior became the commercial center of the area. Since the town was independently owned and operated, when the mines closed the residents remained at South Superior. All of these villages and communities are often lumped together and called Superior. In actuality, only the Union Pacific-run community in the NE1/4 of Section 29 and W1/2 of the NW1/4 of Section 28, T21N, R102W, is where the townsite of Superior is located (48SW4068).

After Union Pacific Coal Company took over Superior Coal Company in 1916, the town experienced rapid growth. By 1922 there were over 217 residential structures at the camp. In addition, the community boasted a bank, opera house, hospital, and several schools. Also evident were the ever-present company store, mine office, and superintendent's house. Several industrial support facilities existed in town, but the majority were located along the northern edge of town. These facilities included the boiler house, machine shop, boilermaker shop, fan house, hay shed, stables, and tippie. Besides the more permanent structures, the majority of the homes had several outbuildings. The most common outbuilding was the outhouse, but chicken coops, rabbit hutches, and coal sheds were also prevalent.

Horse Thief Canyon, where the Superior mines were located, is situated in a semi-arid region. Paradoxically, one of the biggest problems facing the miners was the overabundance of water. The Superior mines penetrated an aquifer and the coal mines had to be dewatered. Water wells, which were actually placed along Horse Thief Creek to dewater the mines, were essential

in keeping the underground operations running smoothly. From the beginning, water inside the mines would be a problem.

Dewatering the mines placed large volumes of water into the Horse Thief drainage. Since Horse Thief Creek was essentially a perennial drainage it did not have the carrying capacity to handle the additional water from the mines. Down-cutting quickly took place and the drainage became deeply incised. With increased mining activity, more water was pumped from below ground. Added to this was periodic heavy runoff. Once down-cutting penetrated the soft alluvial fill of the canyon, bedrock impeded further downward entrenching of the drainage. Encountering of these bedrock nick points forced the drainage to cut laterally. As a result, side-cutting threatened structures built along the creek banks.

One early account of Superior recorded in "The American Guide" provides some insight into the town's origins and ethnic diversity.

Growth and development in the Superior district is directly attributable to the coal mining industry. From the time the first mines were developed in this district, the town rapidly grew into prominence as an important mining town and with the construction of a branch from the Union Pacific main line new mining concerns have located along the canyon and have begun operations.

To increase its industrial means of coal mining this town drew a conglomeration of racial groups. Here a number of different nationalities are working and living congenially. The basic characteristics and cultural heritages of each nationality are engendered by hard living conditions of the Old World and is conducive to habits of industry, frugality, and contentment with the new conditions.

Relationship of these racial groups to community development is best shown by the tendency of the various groups to contribute to the community the best habits and characteristics of their cultural heritages thereby adding to the general welfare. Contemporary racial groups retaining their ethnic identity are Japanese, Chinese, Negro, and to a lesser degree Mexican. Other groups intermarry freely and are fast losing their ethnic identity.³

Among the various nationalities to migrate to Superior were the Italians, Yugoslavians, Austrians, Scots, and Greeks, to name but a few.

The variety of people living and working in Superior contributed to various churches being established in the town. Most notable were Episcopal, Catholic, and Mormon. These congregations met in the meeting hall at Superior, and later a church was constructed near South Superior to accommodate the Catholic worshippers.

The growing town of Superior and the surrounding area needed a dependable water supply. The water system was originally designed to serve Superior and the other coal camps. South Superior, which was privately owned was not intended to be the beneficiary of this service. Nonetheless, water lines were eventually run to South Superior and the town was tied into the Union Pacific water system. When the mining camps were abandoned, the water lines were left in place. In a piecemeal fashion, the water lines were shut off to the various abandoned mining camps.

To alleviate the water shortage, a water system for Superior was built during World War I. The addition of wells, water towers, cisterns, and an underground water system greatly improved the town's waterworks. Although this system was not totally satisfactory, it facilitated obtaining drinking water for at least most of the residents in the area.

A 1925 insurance map for Union Pacific property clearly shows the water system in place at Superior. The map was revised in 1948 and included the "War Housing Project" on C Hill. Interestingly, while the Union Pacific water lines provided water to their own housing, the map shows no tie-in to South Superior. The water system was clearly designed to serve the now abandoned coal camps at Superior, B Hill, C Hill, D Mine, and D. O. Clark. The War Housing Project was connected with the water system after its construction during World War II. If South Superior wanted running water, it was forced to tie into the Union Pacific system. Developing its own water system was out of the question for both financial and logistical reasons. The logistics of establishing their own water system meant crossing Union Pacific land to a water source, something not easily accomplished.

Historically, a variety of structures were constructed at Superior. They were indicative of the services needed to accommodate the large population of a company town. The size and ethnic variability present at Superior dictated, to a large extent, the diversity of structures required to house a variety of services. Unfortunately when the town was abandoned in the 1960s, most of the structures were dismantled or moved away. The majority of these structures were wood, and were easily moved to other localities, such as Rock Springs. Simply moving out the homes was the preferable method of dismantling the town. However, moving out buildings was only part of the dismantling process.

In the 1950s Union Pacific began slowly closing down its coal mining operations at Superior. When the D. O. Clark mine closed in 1963, the process of closing coal mines was complete. Since Superior, D Hill, C Hill, and the structures around A Mine were all owned by Union Pacific. Union Pacific was faced with tough decisions. Unlike previously abandoned coal camps, here at Superior there was privately owned property juxtapositioned in the middle of company land. To avoid paying property taxes and to prevent the homes at their camps from falling into disrepair, the houses and structures were either dismantled or moved. Removing these homes also meant pulling out utilities and shutting off water. With the town of South Superior nearby, Union Pacific was forced to continue at least minimal services to the private homes and businesses. In addition, there were private homes near Premier. Instead of being able to shut down the water and electric services, Union Pacific had to maintain portions of water lines until they could make different arrangements. In the meantime they shut down laterals serving Superior, C Hill, D Hill, and D. O. Clark. Shutting down the laterals meant closing valves or plugging the tee at the main. Union Pacific could not afford investing in removing the lines and since services had to be continued to Premier it was not feasible to even consider pulling out the pipe. Plugging pipes and shutting valves was a temporary answer but became a long term solution. Problems growing out of partially shutting down the water system would continue for decades.

The Union Hall

The Superior Union Hall symbolizes the fact that bituminous coal was a significant force in the economic development of Sweetwater County - Coal from Sweetwater County mines fueled the locomotives of the Union Pacific railroad as they crossed the plains and mountains of the west. Through the nineteenth century the bulk of the coal extracted by Union Pacific came from the mines at Rock Springs, Almy, and Carbon. At the turn of the century the Almy and Carbon mines began to play out and new deposits of coal were sought and a large source of coal was discovered 20 miles northeast of Rock Springs at present day Superior. The town developed quickly. By 1906 the Superior Coal Company operated five mines in the general vicinity⁵ of Superior and South Superior and by 1911 both towns were incorporated. The growth of mining activities in Superior coincided with the growth of labor, specifically the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

The UMWA grew quickly in size and influence and by 1908 they had become extremely influential in Southwestern Wyoming. By 1920 when John L. Lewis became president of the UMWA the Union had almost 5,000,000 members across the country, and in Superior alone six locals contributed money to build a hall for Union activities.⁶ The influence of the Union is expressed by the size of this building. It was the largest structure in the downtown area and towered over all other buildings in South Superior throughout its history as it does today. The building housed not only Union sponsored activities, but also political rallies, local social gatherings, and recreational events. In addition offices for a doctor and a dentist were also located in this building. These activities continued throughout the existence of the town of Superior. With the closing of the mines in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the dismantling of the company town of Superior, use of the Union Hall declined. Yet for a period of some 40 years the Union Hall had been an integral part of the social life of Superior and South Superior. The building represented the importance of coal mining and the Union throughout the history of Superior as well as the civic pride of the towns residents. The hall served as a focal point for residents of the two separate communities, and served to link these communities in a way few other factors were capable of doing. In this role, the Superior Union Hall made a significant⁸ contribution to the social development of these coal mining communities.

The Superior Union Hall was the outgrowth of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Through the nineteenth century numerous small scale local Unions and brotherhoods formed across the country, however, national Unions remained weak and divided until late in the nineteenth century the UMWA formed. This organization was an industrial Union open to both skilled and unskilled workers. The UMWA entered the Wyoming coal fields in 1903 and by 1907 had organized much of the labor force in southern Wyoming.¹⁰ This made the UMWA one of the most powerful unions in the state.

As the Superior and South Superior communities grew it was felt that a recreational area was needed in South Superior. In 1921 six UMWA locals banded together to raise money to build this structure. A combination of bank loans and donations of two dollars per month from Union members raised the needed capital and the brick Union Hall was built. In 1922 the UMWA transferred title to the building to the Superior Mine Workers Temple.¹¹

The Union Hall quickly became the social center of both South Superior and Superior. Portions of the building were used through time as a bowling alley, grocery store, skating rink, and meeting hall. The dance hall on the second floor was used for dances and theatrical performances.¹² Union meetings and political activities were also a feature of the Union Hall through the 1930s and 1940s. With the decline in the coal industry in the late 1940s and 1950s use of the Union Hall was greatly reduced. Portions of the ground floor temporarily served as a doctor's office, but by the early 1960s the population of Superior and South Superior had declined to a point where it was no longer possible for the UMWA locals to maintain ownership of the building and it was sold in 1964.¹³

The new owners of the Union Hall, Mary and Olga Knezovich attempted to run a cafe in the building's ground floor, but the continued decline in the population of the Superior and South Superior communities rendered this effort unprofitable and it eventually closed. The building was abandoned and began to fall into disrepair. The brief revitalization of the South Superior economy during the "boom years" of the 1970s did not affect the Union Hall and the building continued to deteriorate.¹⁴

Today the building is in a very poor state of preservation. However, it still represents the historic importance of coal mining and the union within the towns of Superior and South Superior. As a civic center, the building served to unite the residents of the company owned town of Superior with the independent town of South Superior and as such, was and remains one of the most significant structures in either community.¹⁵

III. THE UNION HALL

The Superior Union Hall is a parallelogramatic structure built of concrete and brick. Due to its size and unique configuration the building dominates the South Superior business district. The facade of the building faces the main street of South Superior. It is built of red brick with four pilasters which extend upwards from street level to the second floor. The pilasters have both bases and capitals. Above the pilasters is an enlarged stone cornice which separates the second floor level from the attic. The main entry way to the building is located in the center of the facade within a segmented arch. The arch has radiating voussoirs and a keystone. This entryway leads to a central staircase which runs from the basement through the ground floor and up to the second floor. Above the arch and below the second floor windows appear the words "Union Hall". At the very top of the facade is a metal crest bearing the letters UMWA for United Mine Workers of America. North and south of the main entryway at ground level, the facade has been modified extensively. North of the entryway the facade has been filled with bricks and a new doorway and windows are present. South of the entryway the facade has been covered with a double hung wood frame gate. At the second floor level, ten rectangular windows with wooden frames and surrounds are present. The glass has been removed. A row of eight square windows are present at the attic level. The wood frames, surrounds and glass have been removed.

The remaining three elevations, the north, west, and south consist of concrete foundations and walls which extend up to the level of the first floor ceiling. Above this the elevations consist of buff colored bricks. A

chimney is present along the south elevation approximately one quarter of the distance west of the southeast corner.

The east elevation contains 15 openings all of which are windows. A total of six small rectangular windows open into the ground floor, eight large rectangular windows and one small rectangular window open into the second floor. All have wooden frames and surrounds, however, the glass is missing from all windows. Four additional openings in the north elevation have been filled with cinderblocks.

The west elevation has eight openings. One is a large entryway leading to the basement. This entryway has been boarded shut and partially covered with earth. Two doorways and two windows open into the ground floor. All have wooden frames, however the glass from the windows and the hardware from the doorways have been removed. The remains of a wooden walkway are present at the base of the two doorways. This consists of a row of rectangular indentations which held wooden studs. Two studs are still in place, the remainder have been removed. Three openings in the second floor level of the west elevation include a doorway and two windows. The doorway opens onto a small platform which extends out from the wall. A stairway may have once led downward from the platform to ground level. The two windows are rectangular in shape with wooden frames and surrounds.

The south elevation contains the greatest number of openings with 25. A doorway and eight small square windows open into the basement. All eight windows have been boarded shut. Five small square windows open into the ground floor. All frames, surrounds, and glass have been removed. The remaining 11 windows open into the second floor. These include one small and ten larger rectangular windows with wood frames and surrounds, but with all glass removed. The two easternmost windows are positioned slightly lower than the remaining nine.

The interior of the building is divided into a basement, ground floor, second floor, and attic. The basement, first and second floors are connected by a central staircase which is located at the center of the east end of the building. The basement consists of three rooms, a large western room a boiler room in the southeast corner, and a room in the northeast corner. The staircase separates the southeast and northeast rooms. The ground floor is divided into a north room and south room, both of which run the length of the structure. Access to the building is presently through a doorway leading to the north room. An opening in the dividing wall permits access from the north room to the south room. The original access through the main entryway to the staircase has been sealed shut.

The second floor consists of a large room with a stage at the west end. This room functioned as a dance hall and meeting room. The stage consists of a raised wood frame platform with stairways on the north and south ends. Small dressing rooms are located north and south of the stage. At the east end of the second floor are four small rooms and the central staircase.

Unfortunately, the structure has suffered from years of neglect. Although the building is structurally sound, the South Superior Union Hall needs immediate attention.

V. FOOTNOTES

1. Wyoming Secretary of State, Wyoming State Census, 1915, Cheyenne, Wyoming.
2. Wyoming Secretary of State, Wyoming State Census, 1925, Cheyenne, Wyoming.
3. Sweetwater County Museum, The American Guide; Manuscript on file, Green River, Wyoming.
4. Ibid.
5. National Register of Historic Places, Superior Union Hall Nomination; Manuscript on file, Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office, Cheyenne.
6. Ibid. c.f. Gardner, A. D. and D. E. Johnson. Cultural Resource Inventory and Mitigation of Thirty-seven Mine Reclamation Sites in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Cultural Resource Management Report No. 29. Archaeological Services of Western Wyoming College, Rock Springs. 1985
7. Ibid. c.f. Anonymous. The Kabibanokka. Green River. Manuscript on file Sweetwater County Museum, Superior file. 1962.
8. Ibid. c.f. Gardner, A. D. and D. E. Johnson. Cultural Resource Inventory and Mitigation of Thirty-seven Mine Reclamation Sites in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Cultural Resource Management Report No. 29. Archaeological Services of Western Wyoming College, Rock Springs. 1985
9. Ibid. c.f. Anonymous. The Kabibanokka. Green River. Manuscript on file Sweetwater County Museum, Superior file. 1962.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. c.f. Gardner, A. D. and D. E. Johnson. Cultural Resource Inventory and Mitigation of Thirty-seven Mine Reclamation Sites in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Cultural Resource Management Report No. 29. Archaeological Services of Western Wyoming College, Rock Springs. 1985
12. Ibid. c.f. Anonymous. The Kabibanokka. Green River. Manuscript on file Sweetwater County Museum, Superior file. 1962.
13. Ibid. c.f. Gardner, A. D. Historic Problems within the Water System Serving the Mining Communities in Horse Thief Draw, Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Archaeological Services of Western Wyoming College. 1989.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. c.f. Gardner, A. D. and D. E. Johnson. Cultural Resource Inventory and Mitigation of Thirty-seven Mine Reclamation Sites in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. Cultural Resource Management Report No. 29. Archaeological Services of Western Wyoming College, Rock Springs. 1985
16. Ibid.